DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 929 IR 007 216

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TITLE The First Signs of April. The Need for Early Stimulation: A Sense of the World. Student Guide--Footsteps. Report Number 3.
INSTITUTION Applied Management Sciences, Inc., Silver Spring, Md.; Educational Film Center, Springfield, Va.; Maryland Univ., College Park. Inst. for Child Study.
SPONS AGENCY Bureau of School Systems (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 17p.; For related documents, see IR 007 212-233 and IR 007 396; Best copy available
AVAILABLE FROM University Park Press, 233 East Redwood Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21202 (Student Guide Kit, one of each program, 1-20, $5.95 per kit); Reference Section, National Audiovisual Center, General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 20409 (Films and tapes only)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; Childhood Interests; Childhood Needs; Child Rearing; *Early Childhood; *Educational Television; Family Life Education; Guidelines; *Learning Modalities; *Parenthood Education; *Sensory Experience; Sensory Training

ABSTRACT

This student guide for a program concerned with how children use their senses to learn about the world, and why the first years of life are such a critical time for this exploration, is designed around a magazine format to allow maximum flexibility to different groups using the materials. The guide is divided into seven sections: (1) an overview of the theme and contents; (2) a summary of the major learnings of the theme; (3) feature articles containing the major content and including practical suggestions for parents; (4) a film review section which includes a synopsis of the accompanying film program and a related discussion question; (5) three activities aimed at both individual and group participation; (6) a selection of field activities, discussion questions, and research topics designed to reinforce the ideas presented in the articles and meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom groups; and (7) a bibliography for further reading on the theme. (Author/JEG)

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THE NEED FOR EARLY STIMULATION:

A SENSE OF THE WORLD

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
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ED169929

The First Signs of April

Student Guide

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footsteps

A world to be born under your footsteps...
St.-John Perse

FROM THE EDITORS

All normal children come into the world with all the equipment they need to learn: their five senses. Given the freedom and encouragement to use these senses, children will continue to learn for the rest of their lives.
In this booklet you will learn how children use their senses to learn about the world, and why the first years of life are such a critical time for this exploration. You will also read about some different ways parents can enhance their children's first learning experiences.

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THE BIG IDEAS

Children need to have all their senses stimulated during the first years of life in order to develop to their full potential.

Children learn through contact with many different stimuli, including people, objects and activities.

Some of the most important ways of providing young children with stimulation are touching, holding, playing, talking and reading.

Did You Know That. . .

. . . Babies begin to learn right at birth?
. . . Babies are able to see and hear from the time they are born?
. . . Children learn as much in the first 4 years of life as they will in the next 13?

You're Never too Young to Learn

> If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life...
>
> — Rachel Carson
> *A Sense of Wonder*

Many people think that newborn babies do nothing but lie in their cribs all day waiting to be fed or diapered. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Babies are hard at work during most of their waking hours.

From the time they are born, children are able to learn and eager to do so.

A SENSITIVE ISSUE

In the first years of life children go about learning through their senses — seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching. This arousal and feeding of the senses is call **Sensory Stimulation.**

Watch young children to see how they use their senses to learn about themselves and the people and things around them.

Children study new objects or people and eagerly reach out with their eyes, mouths and feet. Crawling babies are apt to head for any object in sight and examine it by handling it and putting it in their mouths. Even their babbles show clearly that they have been listening very closely to the conversations around them.

Children use their senses in these ways to move ahead in all areas of growth — emotional, social, physical and intellectual. Young babies develop emotional security by feeling the warmth of their parents' bodies and hearing the sound of their voices. Children learn about colors, sizes and shapes by looking at and playing with such toys as crib mobiles or the contents of the grocery cart. By reaching for and grabbing nearby objects, they develop physical strength and coordination.

As young children gather information in these ways, they begin to make sense out of the world around them.

A CRITICAL TIME

People learn from sensory experiences all their lives. We know now, though, that the human brain is especially responsive to sensory input during the first years of life. These years form a **Critical Period** when the human mind is able to learn especially quickly and easily from sensory stimulation.

Critical periods occur when a part of the human body is growing most rapidly. Since the growth of the brain is most rapid in the early years of life, these years form a critical period for the development of the mind.

While it is never too late to learn, many experts now believe that the lack of sensory experiences in the early years can never be fully made up. Later attempts to make up for what was missed in the critical period usually take much more time and effort. They may not always be successful.

A CRITICAL PERSON

The persons who are usually closest to children during this important learning period are their parents. Parents, therefore, play a vital role in creating children's first learning experiences and laying the foundations for their future growth.

In fact, parents have been called children's first teachers, and the home their first school.

We are not the first generation to recognize how the young child learns. Look at what Walt Whitman had to say back in 1855 about how young children "absorb" the world through their senses.

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

— Walt Whitman, "There Was A Child Went Forth" (1855), *Leaves of Grass*

JEAN PIAGET AND THE CHILD'S MIND

Jean Piaget (Pya-zhā) is a Swiss pychologist who has spent more than 50 years studying the intellectual growth of children. His work forms the basis for much of our present knowledge about the way a child's mind develops. Many of his ideas came from carefully observing his own three children over a period of many years.

Piaget calls the first few years of life, when children learn mainly through their senses, the **Sensori-motor Period**. During this period, says Piaget, children learn by interacting with their **Environment** — the people and things around them. By acting on new things and experiences in the environment, children's minds grow and change.

Imagine, for example, a baby named Tracy who sees a rattle for the first time. If Tracy is like most babies, she will be curious about the rattle. She will try to grab the rattle so that she can examine it. In doing this, she will use several skills. She will use her eyes to judge how far to reach. She will coordinate her arms and fingers to reach out and pick up the rattle.

Tracy will also learn some new things. She will find out how light the rattle is, and how its shape feels. As she holds it, she will find out that it makes noise. In these ways, Tracy will learn that rattles are objects that make noise when you shake them. Her picture of the world will be expanded to include this new information.

THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF DOING, TRACY'S MIND WILL HAVE CHANGED AND GROWN.

An Everyday Experience

> . . . If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder . . . he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in . . .
>
> — Rachel Carson
> *A Sense of Wonder*

Learning is a pleasure for young children. They are born with an enormous curiosity, and they eagerly set out to explore and master as much of the world as possible.

It is parents' joy and privilege to be able to introduce children to this world. Fortunately, this is not difficult. Stimulation of the senses can take place during daily activities like feeding and dressing. It can even help make routine tasks more enjoyable for both parents and children.

Nor do parents need a lot of money or expensive toys or equipment to provide their children with adequate stimulation. Many of the most effective and enjoyable children's toys are objects commonly found in the home. Mirrors, sets of pots and pans, and large boxes for crawling in and out of are some good examples.

Other toys can be made from inexpensive materials. A crib mobile can be made by dangling wooden spoons, balls, bells or bright pieces of cloth from a piece of sturdy string. In addition, many libraries and schools now operate toy lending libraries for families.

Parents can help their children grow and learn about the world in a number of ways.

CREATE A STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT

In order to develop skills, children need lots of practice. Parents can provide this practice through the way they interact with children and the kinds of toys and materials they provide. For example, parents can talk and read to their children from the time they are born. Most parents have many opportunities to do this during their daily contacts with the children. They can name parts of the body while dressing or bathing children, or describe smells and tastes while feeding them. They can talk about what they are doing while cooking or cleaning house, or point out familiar objects in picture books.

Parents can also help their children learn by providing them with a wide variety of objects and toys to play with. Objects of different smells, sizes, shapes, sounds, colors and textures will stimulate all of the senses.

GIVE CHILDREN THE FREEDOM TO DISCOVER THE WORLD ON THEIR OWN

Because they seem so helpless, parents sometimes try to protect babies by doing everything for them. When they do this, parents deprive children of chances for stimulation and growth. It is a good idea to let children do lots of things for themselves. Children learn by trial and error.

Children also learn by being physically active. Parents should let children move about freely in safe areas of the home and yard whenever possible. In this way, most children will discover many opportunities to smell, taste, listen, touch, grasp, climb, stack and crawl under and into.

Parents may also find that there are ways they can arrange their homes so that children can do more things for themselves. They might put children's toys on a low shelf, for example, or hang clothes hooks at a lower level.

RESPOND TO CHILDREN'S CUES

Children give many signs that they are ready to learn. They babble and get excited, reach out and smile. By observing their children's behavior, parents can learn to recognize and respond to these cues. These signs are clues to what skills children are trying to learn.

Responding to children's cues can be as easy and natural as repeating and playing with sounds that a baby makes. Or, it could be talking to a 3-year-old about an activity in which he or she has shown a special interest.

Through observation parents can also see when children are not ready to learn. Children learn best when their level of interest is high. Thirty seconds of talking with children about something in which they are involved will be much more profitable than talking to them for five minutes about something in which they are not interested.

Children can be overstimulated, though. If they are given too much stimulation, or if it is given at a time when they are not ready for it, children will tune it out.

On the next page are some activities that can provide children with stimulation at different ages. Parents who try out these activities find that their own lives are enriched, for they are able to expand their own senses through those of their children.

They are able to reawaken their own "sense of wonder."

The Developing Child

This chart lists some of the things children can do at different ages, and some ways parents can help them learn at each stage of growth. Although children usually show behaviors in the order in which they are listed on this chart, children differ in the age at which they show each behavior. For example, many children take their first steps at 12 months. However, a child may start walking at 7 or 15 months and still be well within the normal range. Therefore, the ages listed on this chart are only approximate.

AT AGE...	CHILDREN MAY BE...	PARENTS CAN...
0-6 months	...learning to follow moving objects with their eyes ...starting to reach for objects ...babbling and playing with sounds ...responding to human voices	...put the baby on a pad on the floor so it is easy to move about freely ...suspend bright objects to look and grab at over the crib ...pick up children's sounds and repeat them ...put brightly colored and patterned pictures and objects in the room ...provide touching, tasting and reaching experiences ...talk to children about things around them ...sing to children
6-12 months	...crawling and sitting without support ...holding and manipulating objects ...imitating the sounds and rhythms of human speech ...understanding their first words ...learning to stand alone	...encourage reaching and crawling by putting brightly colored objects just beyond their reach ...let children crawl and explore inside and outdoors on the grass ...provide a variety of objects to touch, hold, shake and bang ...continue to talk to children as much as possible and begin reading simple stories to them
12-18 months	...throwing or dropping objects and watching them fall ...beginning to speak their first words ...beginning to walk	...provide containers and other household objects that they can stack, nest inside each other, or drop objects into ...name different objects that they are touching or looking at, or that appear in books ...give them objects of different shapes to handle ...continue to read and talk to them and encourage their efforts to speak

AT AGE...	CHILDREN MAY BE...	PARENTS CAN...
18-24 months	...creeping upstairs	...encourage children to do those things they can begin to do for themselves, like eating and dressing
	...throwing and kicking objects	...provide paper and crayons for scribbling
	...developing better coordination of their fingers	...carry on short conversations with children and ask simple questions
	...putting on and removing simple garments	
	...beginning to feed themselves	
	...rapidly expanding their vocabulary	
2-3 years	...becoming much more physically active	...help children perform as many tasks as they are able, like carrying objects and liquids to the table
	...expressing a desire to be independent and do things themselves	...begin taking them on short trips, such as to the pet store or on a bus ride
		...let them get outdoors a lot
	...asking questions like "why?" or "what's that?"	...continue reading to children, including children's poetry
3-5 years	...developing the strength and coordination to perform many household activities	...give children responsibility and opportunity to do as many things as they can in the household
	...becoming very talkative	...give children opportunities to talk, and help them put their feelings into words
	...using complete sentences and showing a knowledge of language rules	...let children choose some of their own books from the library
	...showing an interest in fantasy and make-believe	...provide play experiences with other children
		...give them toys they can take apart and build with

FILM REVIEW SECTION

First Signs of April

Sheila and Bob Hornbrenner are recently divorced and have a 1-year-old daughter named April. We see April engaged in many different activities with her parents: grocery shopping; doing the laundry; visiting other children; and being fed and changed. But we also see that Sheila and Bob never get directly involved with April. They do not talk with her, or encourage her to try new things.

As the program develops it becomes clear that April is behind in most things. She doesn't talk, show curiosity about people or things, move around, or even stand up on her own. Sheila and Bob finally realize that April has an important need that is not being met. As the program ends, Sheila seeks out the advice of her friend Marilyn, who is a more experienced parent.

IF YOU WERE IN MARILYN'S PLACE, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE SHEILA?

ACTIVITY PAGES

activity #1
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Based on what you've learned from this program and booklet, how would you reply to the following letters?

Dear Editor:

I've been reading about how important it is to give young children lots of stimulation. I'd like to do this, but I don't have the money to buy educational toys. What should I do?

Signed,
Concerned

Dear Concerned:

Dear Editor:

My wife says that we should talk to our 1-month-old daughter about the things we do around her. This seems silly to me since she can't understand us. Which of us is right?

Signed,
Confused

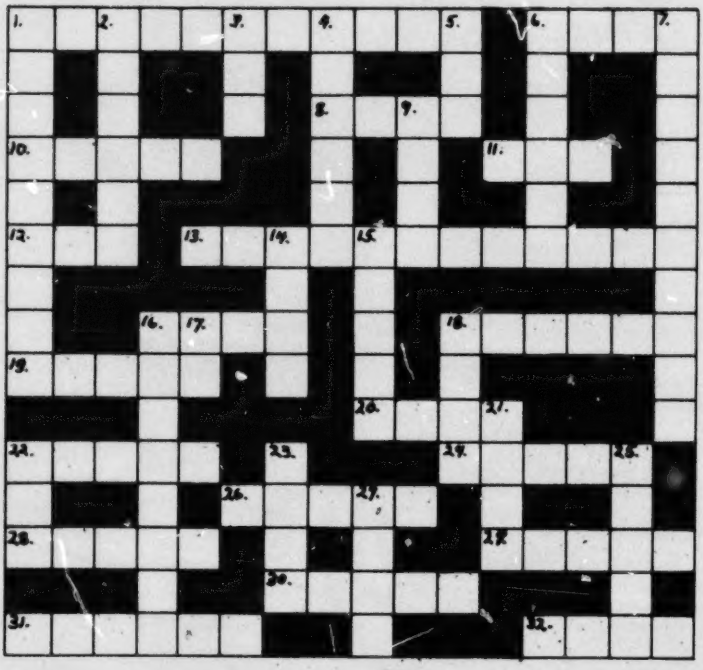
Dear Confused:

activity #2
LEARNING THROUGH EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

Here are some activities that most families do. For each one, list things parents can say or do to encourage children to use their senses. At the end, add your own ideas for other good learning opportunities.

Inside the Home	***Outside the Home***
Feeding a child	Walking in a park or field
Cooking	Riding in a bus or car
Dressing a child	Shopping for groceries
Cleaning the house	Going to the doctor
Other: _____	Other: _____

activity #3
PUZZLE YOUR WAY TO PARENTHOOD



Across

1. We all learn by interacting with our _____.
6. Some of the best toys for children are common household objects like _____.
8. A _____ is born with all of his or her senses working.
10. Children learn by _____ and error.
11. There are many different activities that parents can do to provide children with stimulation at every _____.
12. Children learn more when parents let them try things out on their _____.
13. Children use their senses to move ahead in all areas of growth — social, emotional, physical and _____.
16. Parents help their children learn about the world when they compare objects that are warm and _____.
18. The _____ is the child's first teacher.
19. Through sensory stimulation children begin to _____ about the world they live in.
20. Parents who _____ to their children provide an important source of stimulation.
22. Very young children use their sense of _____ to learn about their world.
24. We know now that the first _____ of life are probably the most important.
26. Babies can learn even when they are lying in their _____.
28. An important way of stimulating young children is through their sense of _____.
29. Children's minds grow through the act of _____.
30. Children use their senses to learn about the _____.
31. Feeding time offers children a chance to learn from the many different _____ they are experiencing.
32. Children give parents _____ when they are ready to learn.

Down

1. Being held and rocked stimulates children's _____ growth.
2. The sense of _____ helps babies learn to recognize their mother and father.
3. Many _____-year-old children like to drop objects and watch them fall.
4. A _____ is a good toy for a baby to play with while in a crib.
5. To be good, a _____ does not have to be expensive.
6. _____ is one of the leading experts on how a child's mind develops.
7. Children need to have all their senses _____ in order to develop to their full potential.
9. Putting a brightly colored _____ just beyond their reach will encourage children to reach and crawl.
14. Parents should _____ to their children from the time they are born.
15. Parents can help children do things for themselves by hanging clothes hooks at a _____ level.
16. Those times when parts of the human body are growing most rapidly are called _____ periods.
17. One-year-old children like to stack things _____ top of one another.
18. When children _____ they are learning as well as having fun.
21. Up until the time we are _____, we use our senses to learn.
22. It is possible to give a child (or a _____) too much stimulation.
23. Parents do not need a lot of money to help their children learn and _____.
25. April did not have many opportunities to use each _____.
27. Babies are able to learn as soon as they are _____.

GRAB BAG

to do

1. Observe a child in a day care center, nursery school, Head Start Center, or home. Watch the child for at least 30 minutes, and keep a record of:
   - what the child does
   - what senses he or she uses
   - what she or he seems to learn
   - what opportunities there are in the environment for the child to learn
   - what the parents or teachers do to help the child learn
   - what other learning activities you would recommend.
2. Plan an activity or bring in a toy or common household object that can help children learn through one of their senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell. Try out the activity or toy with a child, and explain to the class:
   - what sense(s) the object or toy can stimulate
   - for what age child the toy might be best suited
   - what happened when the toy or object was given to the child.
3. Do a survey of toys displayed in department stores and toy stores. Look for toys that would provide children with sensory stimulation. Make a list of those toys that you would include in a toy lending library for preschool children.
4. Look through magazines, newspapers, and other printed materials for pictures of young children whose senses are being stimulated by people, objects or activities. Discuss the pictures with your classmates, and combine them into a collage or other display.
5. Put together a book of experiences — activities, games, trips, etc. — which encourage the use of the senses.
6. Visit a Montessori school. How do the materials there help children learn through their senses?

to discuss

1. What would you do as a parent to make your home safe for children to explore?
2. You are a working parent who must hire a babysitter for your 2-year-old child. What instructions would you give the sitter for enriching the time spent with your child?
3. Recall a moment in your life that was full of sensations — for example, a ride in a roller-coaster, your first kiss, or being knocked down by a wave at the beach. In what ways did this experience differ from reading about roller coasters or young love or the beach? What does this imply for raising and educating children?

to research

1. Jean Piaget and his theories about the sensori-motor period.
2. The importance of critical periods, both before and after birth. (Look also under: imprinting; sensitive periods; embryology; teratology; and developmental tasks.)
3. How the brain grows with sensory stimulation.
4. How parents respond to their infants in other cultures. Looking at other cultures can help us better understand our own needs and behaviors. Some of the cultures you might study are the Hopi Indians, the Eskimos, the Fore of New Guinea, and the Tasaday of the Phillipines.

BOOK BROWSING

Here are some books that contain more information on...

...how children learn

A Child's Mind. Muriel Beadle. New York: Doubleday, 1970. (paperback)

Your Child's Intellect. T.H. Bell, Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing Company, 1972. (paperback)

New Parent's Guide to Early Learning. Sara B. Stein. New York: New Academy Library, 1976. (paperback)

...learning experiences for children

Baby To Parent, Parent to Baby. Ira J. Gordon. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. (paperback)

I Saw a Purple Cow and 100 Other Recipes for Learning. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1972. (paperback)

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FOOTSTEPS was developed by a consortium of:

Applied Management Sciences
Silver Spring, Maryland

Educational Film Center
Springfield, Virginia

Institute for Child Study of the University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people — staff, students, teachers and parents — contributed to the development of these materials. Two people in particular, however, deserve special recognition and thanks: Sharon McIntyre, for her tireless efforts field testing the materials; and June Hamning, for patiently typing — and retyping — these pages.

We also wish to gratefully acknowledge the ongoing support of the Division of Educational Technology, U.S. Office of Education, without whose assistance these materials would not be possible.

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Published by

University Park Press
International Publishers in Science, Medicine, and Education
233 East Redwood Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

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